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SUBJECT: PUBLIC SECURITY VICE MINISTER PROMISES PROGRESS ON
RELIGIOUS ISSUES

Ref: A) Hanoi 395

HANOI 00002381 001.2 OF 003

11. (SBU) Summary: IRF Ambassador John Hanford met Vice Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong August 18 to discuss the GVN's recent record on religious freedom and to urge the GVN to expedite further progress. Ambassador Hanford provided a list of ten short-term actions that the GVN could undertake in order to show its continued commitment to improve respect for religious freedom in Vietnam. VM Huong discussed the GVN's track record on improving religious freedom, reaffirmed its commitment to creating conditions for freedom of religion, cited positive developments and offered explanations for lagging progress in some areas. His reaction to the suggested short-term actions proposed by Ambassador Hanford was positive and he promised quick action on prisoner releases. End Summary.

Ambassador Hanford acknowledges GVN progress ...

12. (SBU) United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford, accompanied by Ambassador Marine, met August 18 with GVN Deputy Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong. Ambassador Hanford began by noting that the issue of religious freedom had become a positive aspect of our bilateral relations, a message he had conveyed publicly in the United States. He said that during his meetings with various religious groups in Vietnam, all were unanimous in suggesting that conditions have generally improved. While some problems still remain, these groups pointed to many problems that were partially or fully solved. Ambassador Hanford added that the purpose of his trip was to speed up the pace of progress on remaining areas of concern.

... but urges quicker action on remaining problems

13. (SBU) Ambassador Hanford recalled a February 2006 meeting with the Vice Minister at which he had noted that the problem of registration of places of worship in the north had not been adequately addressed by the GVN (Ref A). VM Huong's explanation of the situation had helped Ambassador Hanford to understand some of the challenges related to registrations in that region. The USG would like to see what the GVN can do during the next six weeks to show it is acting to resolve this and other remaining problems.

14. (SBU) To this end, Ambassador Hanford presented a list of suggested actions consistent with the GVN's existing commitment to improve religious freedom. Together with this list, Ambassador Hanford also proposed the idea of a letter from MFA VM Le Van Bang that would discuss the GVN's positive record on improving religious freedom and would lay out a roadmap of future steps that the GVN would take in order to continue improving the situation. This

letter would be an informal, non-public statement of the GVN's intent to continue implementation of its commitments as set forth in the May 2005 exchange of letters on religious freedom.

Ten recommendations for short-term action

15. (SBU) Ambassador Hanford went through the list of ten suggested actions, calling for quick GVN action to demonstrate continued progress on religious freedom. The suggested actions included: registration of 100 congregations in the north, as well as registration of groups elsewhere in the country that are already in the pipeline; clarification of registration procedures; amnesty for prisoner of conscience Ma Van Bay; resolution of problems between churches and local officials in Thanh Hoa Province; creation of a single GVN point of contact to whom individuals and groups with registration problems could report; facilitation of a dialogue between ECVN religious groups and the GVN Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA); approval of pending requests for religious training courses; and dissemination of a public notice to local and provincial officials that makes clear their responsibility for facilitating the free practice of religion, including registrations.

16. (SBU) Concerning the amnesty of Ma Van Bay, Ambassador Hanford mentioned he understood the complications of this case, as well as the conditions necessary to qualify for amnesty. His understanding of the case is that Bay was arrested because he had been found with church collection proceeds (approximately USD 9) in his home and local officials misunderstood the situation.

Vice Minister: GVN making progress on religion issues ...

17. (SBU) VM Huong said he was pleased with the list of suggested actions. He recognized that some U.S. Members of Congress have used Vietnam's status as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) to try to

HANOI 00002381 002.2 OF 003

impede Vietnam's WTO accession. However, because the CPC designation was a unilateral U.S. decision, many Vietnamese did not see any need to respond to U.S. demands. Moreover, Vietnam has for many years protected religious freedom: over 20 million Vietnamese had joined religious groups and do not face problems in their activities. There are problems for some small evangelical groups in the Central Highlands who had contacts with the FULRO separatist movement, but that there is no problem with "normal" Protestant groups, VM Huong said. (Note: FULRO was a separatist group that sought the creation of a separate ethnic minority homeland in the Central Highlands. End Note.)

18. (SBU) The GVN will successfully carry out all the items mentioned by Ambassador Hanford, the Vice Minister continued. The purpose of the GVN is to serve the interests of the Vietnamese people. After the end of thirty years of war, the biggest problems facing the country were poverty and hunger and the "consequences of war" still faced by over 100,000 families. (Note: The reference to consequences of war is GVN shorthand for Agent Orange/dioxin. End Note.) The Vietnamese people had recovered through their own efforts, without the U.S. assistance received by other countries. In order to have better bilateral relations, the United States and Vietnam need to look at the overall situation. As living conditions improve, the spiritual life of people is also becoming better. The pace of development is fast, with tribal people in the mountainous areas learning from the Kinh majority in the deltas and cities.

19. (SBU) According to VM Huong, there is no reason for the GVN to prevent tribal groups from practicing their religions. Since 2000, the GVN has successfully separated "normal" religious groups from FULRO-related groups. The USG does not support anti-GVN activity in the Central Highlands, he said. According to a GVN decree, local officials are required to allow freedom of religious practices, and in 2004, the National Assembly passed the Ordinance on Religion and Belief. Statistics demonstrate the development of Protestant activities in the north and the south. Currently, there are thousands of people engaged in Protestant activities. In Dak Lak

Province, progress has been slower because more time was needed to separate "normal" churches from other groups. But VM Huong expressed his optimism about implementing the law on religion. In June, the Vice Minister spoke to officials in the central region to check on the registration of Protestant groups and urged them to work faster. However, some separatist elements still remain, preventing people from registering and even threatening leaders, VM Huong said.

... but faces challenges in Northwest Highlands

¶10. (SBU) In the Northwest Highlands, VM Huong said it is not clear which groups are actually Protestant. Compared to the situation in the Central Highlands, the number of believers in the Northwest Highlands is small, approximately 110,000 persons. A number of factors have contributed to the slower progress on registrations in the Northwest Highlands. Because the definition of "Protestant" is not clear among these people, officials have to identify and clarify their status. Officials have problems with communication since many local people speak their own dialects and registration efforts require interpreters. Moreover, people often live in remote areas requiring more than a day to reach. Consideration must be given to the issue of conflict within families, and people must be made aware of the need to allow family members to follow their own beliefs. At the same time, traditional worship practices must be respected. Some religious groups create a financial burden for their members. Also, some groups adopt superstitious beliefs, e.g., after the death of a leader, the entire village would die. The GVN is aware of these problems, but efforts will proceed faster because the GVN knows the Northwest region well. During the past six months, registrations were issued to eight groups as an experiment, all of which were doing well. The GVN respected people's beliefs and facilitated their religious activities as part of overall GVN policy to improve living conditions. VM Huong recognized the contribution of Christian and Buddhist groups to social activities such as orphanages, and said the government encourages people to engage in such activities.

¶11. (SBU) Regarding a roadmap of future GVN actions to promote religious freedom, VM Huong said religious freedom is always integrated into plans such as poverty alleviation, homebuilding, fighting hunger, electrification and road-building. Once people had electricity, they could practice their beliefs and pastors could teach them about their beliefs. The GVN has a five-year comprehensive plan for the Northwest Highlands to provide roads and electricity to all villages in the region. Cultural and religious activities would be a part of this plan.

GVN would cooperate on implementing suggested actions

HANOI 00002381 003.2 OF 003

¶12. (SBU) Responding directly to the ten actions proposed by Ambassador Hanford, VM Huong said he supports them and would show cooperation. It should not be a problem to register even more than 100 churches in the Northwest Highlands by the end of the year. On August 24, VM Huong would meet with all provincial directors of public security and direct them to expedite registration procedures. The purpose of registration is to locate religious groups and to know how many churches there are. The process has been slow for two reasons. First, officials in the north understand old practices, but do not completely understand the new policy on religion. Second, some officials may be indifferent to registration of Protestant groups. Some Protestants have complained outsiders arrived and laughed at their unfamiliar form of worship. In some cases, outside pastors have come to a place and not cooperated properly with local authorities, leading the authorities to think the churches were doing something wrong. Local officials have been concerned about persons coming from the Mekong Delta to conduct drug trafficking. That was the origin of the term "illegal preacher." Regarding the amnesty of Ma Van Bay, VM Huong said he could not promise, but that the GVN would try hard. He also said that, while he could not be specific, all four persons considered to be prisoners of conscience by the U.S. would be released.

¶13. (SBU) The Vice Minister closed by saying Vietnam is a peace-loving country that respects the interests of its people. The development of Vietnamese society, together with the development of the U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relationship, would help to solve the problem of religious freedom. The Vietnamese do not want others to do their work for them. VM Huong expressed his hope that every Vietnamese person would have the right to follow his/her own belief and wants the United States to view the GVN as respecting people's freedom.

¶14. (U) Ambassador Hanford cleared this message.

MARINE